A NOT SO SIMPLE GOSPEL

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John 10:22-30
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I was standing in a corner at a Rehearsal party for the wedding of my wife's niece in New Castle, Delaware recently, minding my own business, when a young man, an usher - recently graduated from college, approached and said, "Are you a Christian?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I mean: are you born again?" I should have known better but I responded, "Well now, that depends on what you mean..." And he interrupted: "How come you Presbyterians can't say yes or no? It's a simple question, isn't it? You either are or you aren't." From that point the conversation deteriorated.

Our culture wants

It belongs to our humanity to crave simplicity. Our fascination with the past, our rampant nostalgia, are born of the notion that things were simpler then. Our love affair with the cinema Western reveals the same deep craving. We wish for a world in which right and wrong were clearly discernable, a world in which truth and falsehood were self evident. And sometimes our need overcomes our common sense and we behalve as if the world were really like that.

Sometimes that impetus toward simplicity is disastrous. Political tyrants, for instance, depend on people's impatience and willingness to sacrifice complicated realities like human rights for simpler things like the trains running on time, or "law and order." But sometimes the impetus is altogether healthy.

The linguists in our society are suggesting that we are losing the ability to speak simply and plainly. C. S. Lewis, I think, has written that "every profession is a conspiracy against the language." Ask a lawyer, doctor, educator, theologian, scientist, technician, a question and ordinarily you will not get an answer you can understand. On the very first page of Edwin Newman's book, Strictly Speaking, is quoted Harry Ashmore talkling about an election as "the quadrennial challenge of giving focus and perspective to the polemics of contending partisans," Professional politicians become experts at obscurity. Former New York City Mayor Robert Wagner was asked on "Meet the Press" if he would endorse Robert Kennedy's candidacy for the Senate. Newman dutifully records three full pages of verbiage at the end of which the Mayor had not yet said yes or no. (p. 82-84) More seriously, it will be a very long time before I will o forgive myself for hearing the Pentagon phrase "protective reaction strike" and refusing to acknowledge that what was being described was the dumping of napalm on Vietnamese villages.

The obtuseness of the language used by leaders is inexcusable. Our craving for simplicity is altogether healthy. A frequest admonition which ministers hear is "just preach the simple gospel." Sometimes we deserve that. I ~~dearly loved~~ a story ~~I heard the Rev. Earnest Lewis tell last~~ year. St. Peter and the late Paul Tillich, immenent theologian, were approaching the pearly gates. Jesus met Peter first and said, "Peter, who do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You are the Christ

Christ the Son of the living God, " and Jesus said, "That's right, Peter. Come on in." Then Jesus said, "Dr. Tillich, who do you say that I am?" The venerable theologian responded: "Ontologically, you are the ground of all being. Being as such, Existentially, you are the Divine/Human Encounter, man's ultimate concern about being and non-being resolved once and for all. Echatologically, you are future hope, the essence of a new weltenschaung for the whole cosmos." And Jesus said, "Huh?"

Pardon the irreverence, but sometimes we deserve that. Albert Camus, not himself a Christian, kept demanding clarity from those who were. The world expects us to be loud and clear, he wrote, so that the simplest person will know what we mean. And my colleague, Arthur Romig, in his years of ministry in China, knows - and tells me gently on occasion - that if you can't say it plainly enough so that an unlettered peasant can understand, in his language, you better think it through again.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, on the one hand, is the very essence of simplicity. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son: that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) That needs no elaboration. That is the good news. And yet when I hear someone referring to the "simple gospel" I become uncomfortable because my experience has been that it is not simple. I confess that I rely on its simple truth as a foundation, but that over the years I have struggled with it, and wrestled with it, and argued back at it and some days believed none of it at all. With some envy I confess that I have not

found the Gospel simple. And with some conviction I submit that when people talk about the simple gospel they are often talking about simple-mindedness. I submit that our text this morning ~~—~~ teaches that lesson rather pointedly.

Signs of Jesus to illustrate

~~It was~~ the Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah, an eight day ceremony which remembered and celebrated the purification and reconsecration of the Temple in 165 BC by Judas Maccabeus. He was teaching indoors, walking in the portico of Solomon, and a delegation of Jerusalemites said, in effect, "preach the simple gospel." "How long will you keep us in suspense?" they asked. "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Some interpreters feel that it was a trap. If he had said, "Yes I am the Christ." they could have arrested him on the spot for blasphemy. Others, however, hear a sincere question. They wanted to know, simply and plainly, if he was the Christ.

His response is interesting. He said, "I have told you, and you do not believe." As a matter of fact, he had not told them, in their terms. Earlier in the Fourth Gospel, he has referred to himself as the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Son of Man. But he had not said, "I am the Christ, the Messiah of God, for whom you are waiting and looking." Instead he said, "look at my works:" if what I am doing does not convince you nothing will.

Why didn't he take his chances and simply say "Yes, I am?"? Why the obtuseness, the angling? Why the obscurity of parables and similes and metaphors? Why the cryptic allusions and the final, thundering silence in front of Pontius Pilate? Perhaps it is only a matter that he was not the Christ they

were expecting: that it would have been wrong for him to say "yes, I am the Messiah who will lead you in revolution against the Romans," or "yes, I am the Lord of the Law and I will vindicate your rigid legalism." Perhaps it is no more complicated than that. But perhaps it was more a matter that some questions, the really important questions, will not be answered with one word. Perhaps it was a matter of his knowing that a man answers that question for himself after a struggel and that the resolution slides out of the category of documented proof into that dusky place called faith.

But what a temptation it must have been for him to say "Damn it all: yes, I am. Take it or leave it!" And what a temptation for his church down across the centuries. It is what our clientel wants. Simple plain answers. There is pain in watching people abandon the places where the struggle ensues in favor or those where the gospel is simple and simple-minded. Frederick Buechner writes: "The pressure on the preacher is to promote the Gospel, to sell Christ as an answer that outsines all the other." (Telling the Truth, p. 36) And Ernest Campbell, very wisely,, "The church is always tempted to give easy answers to hard questions, to succomb to the heresy of exactness. There are questions of the heart that cannot be answered with the plainness of a TV commercial...there are certain parts of life to which a man must respond as a poet." (Locked in a Room With Open Doors, p. 50)

Campbell's suggestion that there is a "heresy of exactness" is a fascinating one. History, I think, documents it. The harder we try to pin down the Gospel in simple assertions, the further we remove ourselves from its intent. The more orthodox we try to be the smaller the circle becomes until the church appears as an exclusive club in which each tries to "out-orthodox" the others. With threats from the outside the church notoriously tries to retreat behind a wall of doctrine and dogma. When Charles Darwin published The Origin of the Species, the church responded with a new wall of orthodoxy called fundamentalism in which the answers are simple. As scientists continue to inquire into the origin of the universe and the nature of matter, the church is inclined to beat a hasty retreat behind a fortress of rigid piety.

We live in a complex time, an important time in terms of the quality of human life for generations to come. The Christian Church, the Body of Christ, is a part of this world, and at its best is a contributing participant in the dialogue. Our witness is not to be confined to our own family reunions on Sunday morning. We are to speak our word out there where nothing is simple: where no one listens when simplicity is a masquerade for simple-mindedness. Whether we like it or not some very complex questions are on the agenda of our society. We may wish they would go away, but they will not. We may respond to them by retreating behind our wall of dogma, and prove to the world that we are irrelevant. Genetic manipulation, abortion, drugs, sexual morality and family stability, war; none are simple;

none are resolved by ignoring them: all of them need the sensitivity, the love and grace which should be the characteristics of the people of Jesus Christ.

Jesus refused to respond in a simple answer. So it has always seemed healthy to me to preserve and protect the mystery of that which cannot be explained, and thee complexity of a Gospel which means to be taken seriously in a complex world by complex men and women. When, in grief, someone asks "Why? Why did this happen," we need to learn that it is appropriate to say, "I don't know." In fact, there is a sense in which the most honest religion always begins with that confession: with a reverent agnosticism; the acknowledgement that there is more to God than we will ever be able to describe, define or comprehend.

Jesus would not submit himself, nor his ministry, to simple-mindedness. He did not tell them plainly. Apparently, he wanted to call something out of them: he wanted the commitment of mind as well as heart: he wanted disciples willing to follow on an exciting pilgrimage of growth and struggle. It required strong people and still does: people willing to bet their lives on him in the absence of the simple evidence they wished to have.

So, to us, who would be his people today. There is pressure from two sides. A secular culture would have us abandon it all. A vigorous evangelicalism would have us say more than we can with integrity. To his inquisitors - the ~~mnes~~ who wanted him to say it plainly, Jesus finally

responded: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them...and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28)

You may never have it all down plainly. But if you follow this Lord, he will know you, and love you and give you eternal life, and nothing will ever separate you from him. You can count on it. Amen.

Our Father, we wish the whole matter were simpler than it is. Stand with us as we struggle: give us faith beyond our knowing and courage to follow Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray and hope and live. Amen.